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Monitoring Dictionary Use

ABSTRACT: This paper reports on a research into dictionary use carried out with a few Italian university students and Italian teachers of English as a foreign language¹. Different expectations on the actual use of dictionaries on the part of students as opposed to teachers were hypothesized on the basis of the different degree of their knowledge of English and of their presumably different occasions of consultation. These hypotheses have been confirmed by the results of the research whose purpose was to verify and assess, on the one hand, the actual use of dictionaries, and, partly, their performance; on the other, the validity of the approach itself.

1. Theoretical and methodological background

1.1. Theoretical background

A number of different studies on dictionary use have been carried out in the last thirty years or so (see Hartmann 1987) with different groups of informants, mainly students and teachers, but also translators and foreign language learners in general. Most of these studies have investigated dictionaries of English and the English language, but other languages, particularly French and German, have also been considered (see Hartmann 1989). They have dealt with dictionaries for native speakers (for instance Quirk 1974), for foreign learners (for instance Béjoint 1981), or for both (for instance Galisson, 1983), and with mono- and bilingual dictionaries (for instance Tomaszczyk 1979). They were usually based on various types of questionnaire, the validity and reliability of which as an instrument of social research and for gathering authentic data has been recently questioned (cf. Hartmann, 1989 and Béjoint, 1989). Different methods have been devised, for instance combining a questionnaire with specific exercises involving the use of dictionaries and with an assessment of the compilers' knowledge of the language (for instance Atkins et al. 1987, Atkins and Knowles 1990), or through the use of protocols (for instance Galisson, 1983). A seminar organized by Euralex, held in Oxford on September 29, 1991, was based on the direct observation and recording of the different steps followed in consulting a dictionary (Atkins, personal communication). Thus the problem of gathering authentic data should have been overcome, even though the people attending the seminar were experts in lexicographic matters and the very fact that they knew that they were being observed maybe affected their performance.

Meaning finding has emerged from most of the various surveys mentioned or referred to above as the most frequent purpose in consulting a dictionary (see among others

Tomaszczyk, 1979, Béjoint, 1981, Galisson 1983, Kipfer 1987): whether dictionaries actually 'give' the meaning of words has been questioned (dictionary users must always adapt what the dictionary says to the context in which the word looked up appears) and indeed the results of a test reported in Bensoussan, 1983, have shown, somewhat surprisingly, that "the use of dictionaries does not significantly affect reading comprehension scores" (ivi 345), but this concerns more the performance of dictionaries and the ways they are used, or misused, rather than the reasons for which they are consulted. However, the form used as a method of investigation for this research (which, in some respects, could be considered as a protocol) involves, among its main features, a critical approach towards the use of dictionaries in as far as the purpose and occasion of consultation are concerned, and an assessment of the performance of the dictionaries consulted.

1.2. Methodological background

In spite of the criticisms often voiced against the use of questionnaires and of similar tools of inquiry, it was decided to make use of a form because it seemed the only possible way of implementing the research. The form has been devised on the basis of certain constraints and in view of certain objectives. The constraints mainly concerned the feasibility of the project, from the point of view of its practicality (handling of the data, number of people involved etc.) and of the absence of financial and technical facilities. Thus the information required was reduced to a minimum, all contained in a single sheet. The main objective was to gather some 'real' data on dictionary use and to verify whether there are considerable differences between the two groups of informants (students and teachers), but it was also planned to test the validity and reliability of the type of form itself, in view of an analogous research to be carried out on a larger scale. Two side objectives, though not less important from the didactic point of view, were connected with some testing of what students had been previously taught during a seminar, and with some sort of consciousness raising with reference to how the English language works and to the role of dictionaries in EFL learning and teaching.

The two groups of informants were both rather small. The first was composed of eleven students, all studying English for academic purposes as part of their curriculum but not majoring in it: they filled in the form after a two-month seminar on the use of dictionaries, so that they were familiar with the terminology used, with basic operations, and with dictionary typology. On the other hand, a certain competence about dictionary use was taken for granted on the part of the five teachers who constituted the second group. Each form was meant for one item only: the students returned on the whole 56 forms (ten students filled in 5 forms, as required, one filled in 6 forms) and the teachers returned 48 forms (one of them filled in only 8 forms, instead of the required 10).

The form (see Appendix I) was meant to be used as a way of recording and, at the same time, checking the rationale behind dictionary use rather than the activities involved in it. Thus, for instance, there is no part of the form connected with the expected and/or actual location of the items looked up. The emphasis is on the approach to dictionary use and on a tentative assessment of the results achieved, if any, rather than on the operations to be done: the assumption was that if the actual consultation of the dictionary is correctly carried out, this would RESULT FROM a correct approach and would RESULT IN a correct assessment. In other words practical reference skills (which were

assumed to be more refined on the part of teachers than on the part of students) were not tested overtly as such, but covertly and indirectly both as a consequence of the reason for consultation indicated and as a condition to be met in order to establish which part of the microstructure proved more helpful (see the 'answer-found-in' column). For instance, if the reason for consultation indicated was 'pronunciation', compilers had to tick the box labelled 'other' in the 'answer-found-in' column and specify something like 'phonetic transcription', thus showing that the information looked for was successfully located (whether it was successfully understood and used is another issue). Of course location is not the only reference skill, but it is basic: without it, the cognitive (most important and less known) aspects of dictionary consultation and the capability of relating the information found to a real use would not take place.

The form was distributed to students and teachers in the spring of 1991. Both groups received detailed instructions as to how to compile the form and a sample copy of it (see Appendix II) was given and explained to each member. In the first column they had to report the item looked up and its citation form (if different) or the headword or headwords looked up, for instance in the case of compounds (thus implying a first, indirect control on their expectations and capabilities). In the second column they had to indicate the context or describe the context in which they had found, or would insert, the item looked up (according to the occasion of consultation). In the third column they would find an incomplete list of possible reasons for consultation with conspicuous 'absentees', notably spelling, equivalent and etymology. Out of experience (contrary to the results of other surveys into dictionary use according to which spelling is one of the most frequent reasons for consultation) the students who had attended the seminar and who took part in this study seldom looked up spelling, most probably because they were rarely involved in productive activities or because they had had few occasions of being exposed to real listening bits. Surprisingly, since they had had quite a lot of dictations in their classes, they did not check the words they happened to misspell. For this reason and in order to save space, 'spelling', which could always be indicated under the label 'other', was not included in the list. The same applies to 'etymology' (which is rarely looked up also according to the various studies mentioned in 1.1), whereas the reason for leaving out 'equivalent' was a different one. Again out of experience, students often consult a bilingual dictionary in order to find the meaning of an English unknown word rather than an Italian translational equivalent or the most suitable one. It would be different in the opposite case, if they consulted the Italian into English part of a bilingual dictionary, but this would have been a very rare case with the students involved in this study since they did not have any translation exercises. Thus 'equivalent' was somehow subsumed under 'meaning finding': the box 'other' was always available and, moreover, equivalents are listed among the microstructure items indicated in the 'answer-found-in' column: they could serve the purpose of checking whether students really looked for them or for meaning². As for the other items in the list, they were all illustrated to the students: 'grammar' mainly referred to morphology.

The label 'occasional' was provided in the list of the occasions of consultation for all those situations which are not directly or strictly linked with the traditional productive and receptive activities, for instance listening to a song, reading an advertisement and the like. In the column for 'dictionary consulted' compilers had been asked to report all the bibliographical data, including editions, which unfortunately some of them did not do.

In the following two columns they had to indicate in which of the dictionaries consulted they had found the answer, if any, to their queries, and then specify in which part of the microstructure. Finally they were asked to assess the performance of the dictionaries consulted specifying whether each of them had proved satisfactory or not: maybe this was perceived as an unnecessary specification since most compilers (with some exceptions among students and with some notable difference, as expected, among teachers) consulted only one dictionary.

When analysing data the information reported by the compilers has been checked in the dictionaries consulted whenever possible. Sometimes this has proven impossible either because the bibliographical references were insufficient to identify the dictionary actually used or because the dictionaries were too old and therefore difficult to obtain.

2. The form

2.1. Students' forms

In spite of the recommendations given, of all the examples illustrated during the seminar and of the information in the sample form, students often failed to indicate the headword looked up when this was different from the actual occurrence of the item, with particular reference to compounds. Only in 2 cases have the students reported having looked up *departure lounge* under *departure* and *long run* under *long* (see below): nothing unfortunately has been said for *get rid of*, *open-ended*, *sand bank* (considered as a compound and looked up in a bilingual dictionary) and *drive someone nuts* (correctly recognized as an idiom and looked up in an idiomatic dictionary which lists idioms alphabetically). The canonical form has been specified only in 5 cases, mainly in the presence of inflected forms, although, admittedly, apart from the compounds already cited, in most other cases the headword corresponded to the form in which the item occurred in the reported contexts.

All students have reported the minimal context of occurrence: in 6 cases they have also specified the source of the passage, which (see Note²) happened to be articles read in class or a set-book (which was ostensibly recognisable also in other cases not explicitly mentioned).

In 42 cases (out of 56, thus 75%) meaning finding was the reason for consultation: a poor second was pronunciation with 8 cases (14.2%), and all the other items ranked between 1 and 3 cases. It is interesting to notice that in 6 cases more than one reason has been indicated, 3 of them being 'meaning' and 'pronunciation'. 'Collocation' has been indicated twice: once in connection with the use of *sour* with reference to *taste*, and once, in a rather unclear way, with reference to the expression *in the distance*. In another 3 cases 'equivalents' have been explicitly mentioned under 'other', consistently with the indication of 'productive activities' as the occasion of consultation and of 'equivalents' as the helpful microstructure element, but with some doubts concerning the type of activity itself (see below) and the reported use of a monolingual dictionary alongside a bilingual one.

In 34 cases (60.7%) receptive activities have been reported as the occasion of consultation. To these another 12 cases labelled 'occasional' or 'other', always connected with

reading, could be added so that there is consistency between the main reason for consultation, meaning finding, and the main occasion of consultation, roughly referable to reading in general. 9 cases concern productive activities, which have not been specified and which raise some doubts given the general setting of the students forms, but which nonetheless show some consistency with the 12 reasons for consultation other than meaning finding and pronunciation. However, 1 of these 9 cases was most probably an error, since all the other items in the form, from the context to the reason for consultation, point to receptive activities. None of them, as expected, concerns Italian items. Some inconsistencies are occasionally present: 1 case labelled 'other' and specified as 'reading activity' raises doubts about the understanding of terminology, also because other parts of the same form show considerable misunderstandings.

A variety of dictionaries have been consulted: in 31 cases a monolingual one and in 42 cases a bilingual one. Among the latter, bidirectional dictionaries have been indicated in 8 cases and monodirectional ones in 34 cases. Among the former 30 are Learners' Dictionaries and one a specialised dictionary. Interestingly in 18 cases students have consulted more than one dictionary: a monolingual and a bilingual in 12 cases, two monolinguals in 1 case and two bilinguals in 5 cases (in these latter cases two editions of the same dictionary seem to have been consulted: the bibliographical references are incomplete and confusing).

The (or an) answer to the students' queries has been found in 51 cases: in 2 cases in which two dictionaries have been consulted the answer has been found in one dictionary and not in the other. In 3 cases the answer has not been found: as a matter of fact in 2 cases it was the students' fault, and the third is debatable. *Long run*, it is true, is not recorded under *long* (see above) in the dictionary consulted, but it is recorded under *run*. *Bourgeois* [sic] is obviously irretrievable in any dictionary (this error was made in the same form already mentioned containing other problematic answers). A quite interesting case is offered by the third case. The item looked up was *crenellated*, which is not recorded in the monolingual dictionary consulted, but which is recorded in the bilingual dictionary consulted. What is rather striking is that the student has reported having found, in the bilingual dictionary, *crenellation* from which he deduced the meaning of *crenellated*. In that dictionary (for once the student has been very accurate about bibliographical data) *crenellation* is a run-on of *crenel* and is recorded immediately after *crenellated*. Perhaps the student did not see it.

The column concerning the microstructure has performed its intended role of control and it offers revealing information connected in some cases with the obvious misunderstanding of terminology and in others with more general issues such as the type of dictionary consulted and the reason for consultation, although in the majority of cases there has been consistency. In 12 cases definitions are reported as the place where the sought-for information has been found and in another 15 cases they are indicated together with other elements, reaching 27 cases out of 48 consistent answers (56.2%). In fact in another 9 cases definitions have been indicated but the dictionary consulted was a bilingual one! Among these, in 4 cases, in which a bilingual dictionary has been consulted alongside a monolingual one, it has been explicitly reported that the answer was found in the examples of the monolingual dictionary and in the 'definitions' of the bilingual one!

Examples have been indicated in 8 cases: among these 1 case is particularly revealing. In this case the item looked up was to *tinker* and the reason for consultation indicated was 'syntax and complementation' ("to tinker at? to tinker with?" as indicated in the 'minimal context' column), so that it would have been possible to find the answer in the examples: the dictionary consulted does indeed report examples with the two prepositions but it also clearly reports them in bold type in parentheses before definitions and examples. As often remarked, information recorded in non-explicit ways, particularly codes, labels and the like, is seldom looked at, and apparently not even read, as in this case, by dictionary users. Examples have been indicated in another 3 cases together with definitions and in 1 case together with equivalents (the dictionaries consulted were a monolingual and a bilingual one). Equivalents have been indicated in 5 cases and codes/labels only in 3 cases, again somehow contradictorily, since 2 cases refer to pronunciation (which was correctly correlated with the box 'other' usually specified as 'phonetic' [sic] in 4 other cases) and the other refers to 'grammar' and 'synonym' as reasons for consultation and to a bilingual dictionary. The box for explanations has been ticked 4 times with reference to a monolingual dictionary but together with other indications which have been obviously misinterpreted, so that these forms have not been included among the consistent ones. Apart from the cases already mentioned the box 'other' has been indicated another 5 times (specifying that it refers to the Cobuild extra-column) together with either definitions or examples with which they have already been counted.

Answers have been reported as satisfying in 45 cases, one of which is probably an error and should have been reported as half-satisfying. It concerns the item *brawler* which, as a matter of fact, is not recorded in the dictionary consulted, even though its meaning could be deduced from the verb *brawl*. In 7 cases answers have been considered as half-satisfying and not satisfying in 2 cases, one referred to a pun in an advertisement and the other to the fact that one of the two elements sought for, the opposite of *boost*, was not given in the dictionary consulted (the other was a synonym). The 2 missing indications (to reach the total of 56 forms) refer to the 2 cases in which the answer has not been found at all, whereas in the case of *crenellation* the answer has been considered as half-satisfying. In another 4 cases the answer has been considered as half-satisfying because it was reported only in one of the two dictionaries consulted. The other 2 half-satisfying cases include *lure down* and *get rid of*. No reason has been found to justify why the answer has been considered as half-satisfying in this latter case, since its meaning, indicated as the reason for consultation, is reported in the dictionary consulted. The case of *lure down* is a different one: it has been mistaken for a phrasal verb, and obviously it is not recorded as such in the dictionary consulted (or in any other dictionary). *Down*, in the context reproduced, was clearly a preposition. The student considered the answer as half-satisfying because he said he managed to infer the meaning of *to lure down* from that of *to lure away*, an example of which appears in the dictionary consulted.

2.2. Teachers' forms

The canonical form has been indicated in all the appropriate cases (13) and so has the headword whenever necessary, namely in 3 cases concerning multi-word lexemes (*come to a head*, *rump-steak* and *bats in the belfry*) respectively looked at under *head*, under *rump*

and at its appropriate alphabetical location in an idiomatic dictionary in the third case. Noticeably three items were Italian and they obviously determined the indication of equivalents as the reason for consultation, productive activities as the occasion of consultation and the use of a bilingual dictionary.

Cotexts have not been indicated, for reasons which appeared clear from the other answers, in 8 cases concerning, for instance, the title of a song, or a student's question, or a curiosity etc. or, quite interestingly, an "attempt to evaluate dictionaries", with reference to the item CD-ROM (see below).

Meaning has totalled 25 cases out of 48 (52%), and it has been indicated together with another element (syntax) only once. The box 'other' has been ticked 7 times for a variety of reasons: 'stress' (twice), 'equivalent' (twice), 'spelling' (once), "to see if the item looked up was still in use" and "to compare the use and meaning of the item looked up (*chorus*) with another item (*choir*)". "Grammar and syntax" have been indicated 4 times each, "pronunciation" 3 times and "synonym" only in two cases: the first connected correctly with the use of a thematic dictionary, but puzzlingly with the indication of 'equivalents' in the microstructure column, as if this term was taken not in its lexicographical meaning of 'translational equivalent' but as a synonym of 'synonym'; the second connected with productive activities and again with the indication of 'equivalents'. This time a bilingual dictionary has been used, correctly according to the occasion of consultation, but inappropriately with reference to the reason for consultation.

The numerical results concerning the occasion of consultation are the following: productive activities, 11 times; receptive activities, 21 times; occasional, 6 times and other 10 times. Among the latter the following have been specified: correcting classwork, preparing lessons, answering students' questions, checking vocabulary in view of a predetermined phone-call, "filling in this very questionnaire" etc. Among the productive cases 3 concern translation from Italian into English, and the others both written and oral encoding activities in English. 1 of them, concerning the item CD-ROM (see below), should have been actually labelled 'occasional' rather than 'productive activities' since it explicitly concerns the "evaluation of dictionaries". It is interesting to notice that 1 of the cases concerning receptive activities is connected with the meaning and use of an English expression as used in an Italian newspaper and in an Italian cotext.

Monolingual dictionaries have been consulted in 60 cases: among these, specialised dictionaries feature 7 times and dictionaries for native speakers 9 times. Learners' general-purpose dictionaries have been consulted in the remaining 44 cases. Bilingual dictionaries have been used 22 times, monodirectional dictionaries in 18 cases, bidirectional ones only 4 times. Both a mono- and a bilingual dictionary have been consulted in 11 cases; two monolinguals in 10 cases and two bilinguals in 2 cases. Three monolinguals have been used 4 times, three bilinguals only once and so have two monolinguals and one bilingual, whereas two bilinguals and one monolingual have been used 4 times.

Teachers have reported having found the answer in 37 cases. In 8 cases they have found a partial answer, i.e. the answer was given only in one of the dictionaries consulted, for instance *apperception*, recorded only in a large monolingual dictionary for native speakers. Among these cases one seems interesting, because the answer has erroneously been reported as not found in two dictionaries out of the three (two bilinguals and one monolingual) consulted: the item looked up, CD-ROM, does not indeed appear in the alphabetical list in one of these dictionaries but it is recorded in a special list of

abbreviations³ even though in two separate entries, one for *CD* and the other for *ROM*; admittedly, only *ROM* appears in the other dictionary. The box 'not-found' has been ticked in 3 cases: the English equivalent for the Italian word *cerchietto* (*a hairband*), actually missing in the bilingual dictionary consulted; the word *zapping*, again really missing in the two monolingual dictionaries consulted (both more than ten years old); and the absence of the stress-shift from *guitar* to *guitarist* in a Learner's Dictionary consulted to check pronunciation.

The answer has been found 14 times in definitions, 5 times in examples and 8 times in both definitions and examples. The boxes for 'equivalents' and 'explanations' have been ticked respectively 3 and 2 times. The box for 'other' has been ticked 10 times, and the following have been given among the specifications: phonetic symbols, illustrations, spelling, and the quite interesting "note in brackets after the definitions" which clearly states that the looked-up verb (*to facilitate*) is never used when the subject is a person. In another 3 cases more than one box has been ticked, namely "examples" and "other" (extra-column), "definitions" and "explanations", "examples" and "explanations". Strangely enough the box for 'equivalents' has not been ticked in the 3 cases in which two bilingual dictionaries have been consulted together with a monolingual one. Another inconsistency concerns the indication of 'definitions' in connection with pronunciation as the reason for consultation, whereas the same box ('definitions') has correctly been ticked in connection with 'syntax and complementati', namely the use of the prepositions *in* and *of* after the verb *consist*, because the dictionary consulted reports the two phrasal verbs as sub-entries, explaining their different uses in definitions.

The answer has been considered as satisfying in 37 cases, half-satisfying in 5 and not satisfying in 2. In 2 cases, which have been considered separately, three dictionaries (two bilinguals and one monolingual) have been consulted: in 1 case all three boxes have been ticked with explicit reference to the three dictionaries: thus the answer has been considered as satisfying in one of them, as half-satisfying in another and as not satisfying in the third one. In the other case the answer has been explicitly reported as not satisfying in one of them (a bilingual dictionary) and as half-satisfying presumably in the other two dictionaries. In the former case there seems to be no clear reason which could justify the evaluation given: the item looked up in order to find its meaning, *spreadsheet*, is given clear and almost identical equivalents in the two bilingual dictionaries consulted, so that one wonders why the answer has been considered as not satisfying in one of them and as half-satisfying in the other. The definition given in the monolingual dictionary consulted is surely clearer and maybe this is the reason why the answer has been reported as satisfying in connection with that dictionary. In the latter case the item looked up, *cognizant*, is fairly well explained in the monolingual dictionary consulted, which should therefore have been evaluated as satisfying and not just as half-satisfying, and there is no significant difference in the way it is recorded in the two bilingual dictionaries to justify the difference in their evaluation (half-satisfying and not satisfying respectively).

The 2 cases in which the answer has been reported as not satisfying concern an Italian item and the explanation of an English item. The Italian item looked up, the medical term *prassie*, is not recorded in the two bilingual dictionaries consulted, but a tentative English equivalent (*praxia*) has been reported as recorded in a large monolingual dictionary for native speakers: the answer is nevertheless reported as not satisfying because the plural form, necessary in the productive activity indicated as the occasion of consultation, was

not found. The English item concerning the other case of a non-satisfying answer is *rump-steak* in connection with a specific reason for consultation, i.e. "which cut of beef it corresponds to": the bilingual dictionary consulted reports for it an equivalent which has not been found in an extremely large Italian monolingual dictionary, and only the illustration of "wholesale and retail cuts of beef" in an English monolingual dictionary somehow answered the informants question. In both cases maybe the answer could have been considered as half-satisfying rather than not satisfying.

The 5 cases considered as half-satisfying concern the following items: *sequencing*, whose didactic sense is deducible from its literal sense but which is not actually recorded as such in the two dictionaries consulted; *features department*, whose meaning, in the informants words, "had to be reconstructed by examining the examples given"; *dimension*, whose pronunciation was sought for and is indeed reported in one of the two dictionaries consulted though not in the other (a specialised dictionary) which maybe is the reason why the answer has been considered as half-satisfying; *staggering* whose meaning is regularly recorded in the monolingual dictionary consulted and for which no apparent reason has been found to explain why the answer has been considered as half-satisfying; and, finally, *acquiesce*, which constitutes a very interesting case. As clearly stated in the minimal cotext reported and according to the reason for consultation indicated, the teacher-informant wanted to know whether that verb can be followed by an infinitive clause. The three monolingual learners dictionaries consulted report examples in which the verb is followed exclusively by noun phrases introduced by the prepositions *in* or *to*, but none of them rules out the possible use of the infinitive or of a gerundive construction. The information sought for is not recorded in a specialised dictionary of collocations either.

2.3. Comparing data

According to the data gathered, teachers have been much more accurate than students in reporting bibliographical data and in specifying the headword looked up. They have reported a wider variety of occasions of consultation, which testify to a language and dictionary use which goes beyond the usual requirements of their professional activity. Students, on the other hand, hardly ever use English or dictionaries outside classes and independently of their homework or exam commitments. Teachers forms, unlike the students ones, show a higher degree of inner consistency: the right dictionary has usually been chosen in connection with the reason for and the occasion of consultation, apart from a very few cases, namely those in which a synonym has been sought for in a bilingual dictionary and the case in which a medical technical term has been looked up (and not found) in general-purpose dictionaries; a specialised dictionary should have been used instead.

Most of the occasions of consultation labelled as 'productive activities' or 'occasional' in students' forms raise doubts about their real nature particularly when compared with the minimal contexts indicated and with the reasons for consultation: if not really inconsistent these cases are at least unclear and maybe indicate a certain confusion on the part of students. Sometimes one gets the impression that certain boxes have been ticked, as already suggested by Tomaszczyk (1979), simply because they were there. Bilingual dictionaries have almost always been used to find the meaning of words, even though

monolingual dictionaries have been used to the same purpose in roughly half of the cases. As already seen in 2 cases only the answer has not been found because of the students' inaccuracy in consulting a dictionary, whereas the most problematic issues come to light in the microstructure column. Apart from the already mentioned cases in which the box 'definitions' has been ticked in connection with bilingual dictionaries, there have been other cases which show terminological and conceptual misunderstandings. For instance in one case the box 'equivalents' has been ticked apparently in accordance with the search for an equivalent (explicitly stated under 'other' as the reason for consultation) for the looked-up item, but inconsistently with the use of a monolingual dictionary. Another case concerns the search for a synonym which has been found in an example in a bilingual dictionary! At a different level, meaning has been found, in 2 cases, among the synonyms reported in a monolingual dictionary, but rather strangely not in the definitions and examples.

Occasional inconsistencies, in addition to those already remarked, appear also, to a lesser degree and extent, in the teachers' forms. For instance in one case 'pronunciation' has been found in the definitions and in another occasion, in which the teacher wanted to know whether a certain item is countable or uncountable, the answer has been found again in the 'definitions' (and not in the less unlikely 'explanations' or in the probable 'examples') of a monolingual dictionary which uses the usual *C* and *U* abbreviations. On the whole, however, teachers' forms are much more reliable than students' ones.

3. Conclusion

The analysis and comparison of students' and teachers' data allow a few general, though not generalizable, comments. Students and teachers are usually the largest groups of dictionary users, but the small number of informants and their specific needs on the one hand and the empirical character of the research, a case study rather than a survey, on the other, do not allow generalizations, although the data gathered interestingly confirm already tested features of dictionary use and, at the same time, offer insights into different elements. Meaning finding has been confirmed as the most frequent reason for consultation. Monolingual dictionaries are more often used by teachers, whereas the majority of students still use bilingual dictionaries more often than monolingual ones, in most cases, as expected, in order to find the meaning of a word (compare data in Atkins and Knowles, 1990). Though there are no data pointing to the following remark, it seems that the students who have used a monolingual dictionary have done so following their teachers' advice and most of them have bought a monolingual Learners' Dictionary on the occasion of the seminar: when bibliographical data about the latter dictionaries have been reported, they all refer to the latest editions. Even though the other reasons for consultation, in particular those connected with 'syntax and complementation', are much less frequent, it is quite significant that the box 'labels/codes' has hardly ever been ticked. If this can be explained by the conditions under which students filled in their forms (see. Note 2), it is rather surprising on the part of teachers.

Items have always been successfully located in the macrostructure, but no 'difficult' items (such as words belonging to different parts of speech) have been reported. As already seen, the microstructure has evidenced a few problems for both teachers and,

more often, students. It seems that a two-month seminar, though definitely useful in order to strengthen students' reference skills, was not enough to instil into them a critical knowledge of 'what is in a dictionary'.

In general the knowledge of the language has played a considerable role with reference to the reason for and the occasion of consultation on the one hand, and the dictionary used on the other. Teachers' questions have been more particular and specific (a particular sense, a specific element) than students and not surprisingly certain dictionaries have proved not to meet their needs.

Large monolingual dictionaries for native speakers have been appropriately used by teachers only, in particular when looking for rarely used items, whereas no distinction has been made by them in the use of bidirectional or monodirectional bilingual dictionaries, particularly in connection with encoding activities such as translation from Italian into English. Whenever a monolingual dictionary has been used for meaning finding together with a bilingual one, the monolingual has almost always proved to be more helpful and to be explicitly considered as such. In one case only (*features department*) a large monolingual for native speakers has been explicitly reported as "not helpful enough this time", as opposed to a bilingual dictionary. In spite of the still overwhelming use of bilingual dictionaries for meaning finding, monolingual ones have been found more useful by students too when consulted together with bilinguals (some of which are rather old). Generally speaking meaning is still interpreted in terms of an interlinguistic (Italian) translation rather than as an intralinguistic (English) explanation, and hardly ever, anyway, in pragmatic terms. In only one case (*cognizant*) a possible explanation for the teacher's rating of the answer as half-satisfying in a bilingual dictionary and as satisfying in a monolingual one might be connected with the pragmatic information about the level of formality recorded in the monolingual and not in the bilingual dictionary.

A systematic assessment of the performance of the dictionaries consulted, apart from the few cases already commented on, has been impossible mainly because the bibliographical data concerning them are too often incomplete, in particular when the edition has not been indicated. As a general remark, based on the high number of satisfying answers reported, they have fulfilled their function. The better they are used, the more their performance is satisfactory. Judging also from the other elements gathered, it seems that there is much more to be done in the direction of dictionary use rather than in that of dictionary making.

As for the validity of the method itself, it seems that the data gathered are sufficiently reliable. A refined version of the form, a larger and more varied group of informants and the lack of the (heavy) constraints which have affected, in particular, the students' indications could lead to more generalizable results.

Endnotes

- 1 I wish to thank them all, in particular my colleagues from both schools and universities Maria Benimeo, Paola Ceriana, M. Antonietta Ortenzi, Silvana Seghetti and Grazia Senes, not only for filling in the forms but also for their comments.

- 2 It must be stressed that the students who filled in the forms were not a sample representative of all their colleagues studying English in the same Faculty and that the experiment took place after a seminar on dictionary use in which their linguistic and lexicographic habits were discussed. The great majority of their occasions of dictionary consultation turned out to be dependent on the preparation for the exam or on class- or homework, the three of them mainly connected with reading activities.
- 3 This applies to the latest edition of the dictionary in question. The previous edition is rather old and it would have been meaningless to look up an item such as *CD ROM* in it, particularly with reference to the reason for consultation reported, i.e. "trying to evaluate dictionaries".

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